

Joseph and the Sin of Pride

Case 2: A Beautiful Coat

The second item of evidence offered as proof of Joseph's pride was that he wore the splendid coat gifted to him by Jacob, his father.

Much has been written about this coat of Joseph's. Here are some samples of online commentaries that give Joseph a bad grade for wearing the coat.

- One writer surmised that Jacob, who felt that Joseph was being unduly picked on by his older brother, gave the coat to Joseph to make Joseph feel better about himself. In other words, the gift of the coat was primarily an issue of self-esteem. In the article, the author wrote, "We can assume at the very least that Joseph wore it with pride and perhaps a bit of smugness at being singled out for this special gift." ¹
- One pastor said in a sermon concerning Joseph, "Whatever this garment looked like, it is clear that Joseph proudly wore it as a constant reminder to his older brothers that Joseph was the favored son." ²
- Another writer said, "Joseph himself is portrayed as a young man somewhat lacking in common sense, or perhaps simply a bit self-absorbed." ³

In each case, Joseph was either a troubled young man who did not know how to act civilly within the family or he was simply filled with an overweening sense of pride and self-importance.

Let's look more closely into the matter of the coat.

There is much debate and disagreement about the nature of the coat. The earliest English texts translate the Hebrew with "coat of many colors," but later translations say it differently. ⁴

KJV & NKJV: a coat of *many* colors (note that *many* is in italics, indicating that the word is not found in the oldest manuscripts but was added by translators to help clarify the text)

Amplified: a long tunic with sleeves

ESV & HCSB: a robe of many colors

NIV: a richly ornamented robe

RSV: a long robe with sleeves

NASB: a varicolored tunic (footnote: full-length robe)

Orthodox Jewish Bible: tunic reaching to palms and soles

New Century Version: a special robe with long sleeves

Dr. W. A. Criswell believed that the tunic was originally white "embroidered gorgeously around the skirt, and the sleeves, and the edges." He taught that the robe was long enough to reach the hands and feet of the wearer, and was typically worn by those who did not have to work because of their status in society. ⁵

According to Strong, the Hebrew word translated “coat” is *kuttoneth*, which referred to a tunic or undergarment, a long shirt-like garment usually made of linen. ⁶

Easton’s Bible Dictionary describes the coat as “a garment long and full, such as was worn by the children of nobles...a long garment with sleeves... a coat of many pieces, i.e., a patchwork of many small pieces of divers colors.” He adds that this garment was “worn like a shirt next to the skin.” ⁷

In Exodus 28, this same word is used to refer to the tunic worn by Aaron and the priests. There, in verse 24, the word is variously translated as “a specially woven tunic” (HCSB), as a “long *and* sleeved tunic of checkerwork” (Amplified, NASB), and as a skillfully woven tunic (NKJV).

Again referring to Strong, the Hebrew word translated “colors” is the word *pas*, which literally meant “flat (of the hand or foot), palm, sole” and was used figuratively to refer to a “tunic reaching to palms and soles.” ⁸

No one seems to know how this word was translated as “color” in the earliest translations (including the Latin Vulgate and the Septuagint), but many believe it was simply a mistake in translation that was carried over into the earliest English versions. However, the suggestion that there are mistakes in translation in such a revered work as the KJV has the potential to ignite a firestorm of dissent.

Once again, let’s look strictly at the text, specifically at Genesis 37:3.

Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his sons, because he was the son of his old age.
And he made him a robe of many colors.

Jacob loved Joseph more than his other sons. To make sure that no one could mistake his favoritism, Jacob created a distinguishing tunic for Joseph to wear. Whether or not it was multi-colored or long enough to reach his feet and hands is not relevant to the story.

The point is that the coat was not Joseph’s idea, but Jacob’s. If the sons of Jacob were going to be angry with someone, why not begin with their own father? If anyone was prideful in this story, that person was Jacob, not Joseph.

What made the coat a symbol of hatred to Joseph’s brothers was not its cut or color, nor the fact that Joseph wore it. What made them angry was the symbolism – the distinctive nature of the coat.

I remember when I was a lowly high school student. My dad worked hard and provided everything we needed and more. My mom was a terrific mother and home-maker. Both of them desired much more for their children than they could afford. But they gave us what they could and everything we needed, and they sacrificed to do it.

I was not a very popular person in high school, although I had a strong desire to be. I thought much of the cause of my unpopularity (which was truly a figment of my own poor self image) was due to my clothes. One of the most popular clothing items while I was in high school was a London Fog jacket. I craved and coveted a London Fog jacket – especially a navy blue one – that I could wear with the collar turned up like all the popular guys did.

My mom was aware of my desire, but could never have afforded to purchase one from a store. So she did the next best thing – she made me one. In color, it was light brown with a small hounds-tooth

pattern. And the material was so limpid that the collar would never stand up. I am ashamed to admit it now, but I was ashamed to wear it then.

Nevertheless, I did wear it – nearly every day. Why? Because my mom made it for me. It was special because she was special to me and I was special to her. I wore it out of respect for her.

Throughout the story of Joseph's life, one personality characteristic that is very obvious to even the casual observer (except those prejudiced by preconceptions) is that Joseph had a heart of gold. I believe he wore his "coat of many colors" because his father went to the trouble of making it for him and expected him to wear it. To have refused to wear it would have been as offensive to his father as wearing it was to his brothers. Given the choice, which one should Joseph choose to offend?

There is no evidence whatsoever that Joseph wore the coat for the sole purpose of intentionally aggravating his brothers by rubbing their noses in their inferiority. Neither is there any support for the idea that Joseph was insensitive to the feelings of his brothers or that he wore the coat out of ignorance or immaturity. The brothers were angry with Joseph and refused to even speak to him, but it was Jacob's actions and their own sinful jealousy that caused their anger, not Joseph's prideful display of his "coat of many colors."

¹ Kadden, Bruce. "From the Coat of Many Colors to a Simple Garment: The Unmaking of Joseph." ReformJudaism.org

² Derek Morris, Pastor of the Forest Lake Church in Apopka, FL

<http://www.bettersermons.org/article/423/sermon-resources/sermon-series/derek-morris/dangerous-dreams>

³ Kathryn Schifferdecker

https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1032

⁴ www.biblegateway.com

⁵ Dr. W.A. Criswell, "The Coat of Many Colors, Genesis 37:3-20," W.A. Criswell Sermon Library, <http://www.wacriswell.com/sermons/1958/the-coat-of-many-colors/#>

⁶ Strong's Hebrew Lexicon, Online Bible Edition, Version 4.32.01, July 18, 2014, Copyright © 1987-2014, Larry Pierce, Winterbourne, Ontario, Canada NOB 2VO. Referenced hereafter as Online Bible.

⁷ Easton's Revised Bible Dictionary, Online Bible.

⁸ Strong's Hebrew Lexicon, Online Bible.